

**University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Human Ecology (SoHE)  
External Graduate Program Review**

**Final Report of External Review Team  
February 27, 2014**

In accordance with University of Wisconsin System expectations for program review and improvement, an external team was commissioned by School of Human Ecology (SoHE) Dean Soyeon Shim and tasked with reviewing all dimensions of the SoHE graduate program. Prior to recruitment of the review team, SoHE faculty and staff undertook a rigorous self-study process and provided an extensive final report plus supporting documents to the review team. Review team members included:

- Dr. Michael Staten, Take Charge America Endowed Chair and Assistant Dean for Careers, Commerce and Industry, Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Arizona (Chair of the Committee)
- Dr. Jennifer L. Kerpelman, Professor and Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies, College of Human Sciences, Auburn University
- Dr. Van Dyke Lewis, Associate Professor, Department of Fiber Science and Apparel Design, College of Human Ecology, Cornell University
- Dr. Douglas D. Perkins, Professor, Department of Human and Organizational Development and Founding Director, Ph.D. Program in Community Research and Action, Vanderbilt University
- Dr. Wendy Weiss, Professor, Department of Textile, Merchandising and Fashion Design and Director, Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- Dr. Michael Bell, Department of Community and Environmental Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The review team was specifically asked to address the following questions:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the graduate program?
2. What major opportunities are available to the program?
3. What recommendations would you make to enable the program to address any weaknesses and capitalize on identified opportunities over the next five years?
4. How best can the School as a whole and each department align resources to meet the school's strategic planning goals as identified in the OneSoHE21 document?

Specifically, we were asked to focus on 4 goals:

- a. Goal #1: Increase research and creative scholarly productivity by significantly expanding faculty research funding and involvement of graduate and undergraduate students in research and creative scholarship.
- b. Goal #2: Infuse the synthesis of research, outreach and engagement throughout all units and functions of SoHE in ways that lead to significant public value and build on our strategic partnership with Cooperative Extension.

- c. Goal #5: Strengthen our graduate programs by expanding depth and breadth of graduate course work and recruiting and retaining top students and faculty with special attention to increasing diversity in backgrounds and perspectives.
- d. Goal #6: Increase capacity with new instructional models that enhance learning to teach more traditional (campus) students better and to reach new audiences (non-traditional/professional students) that ultimately enhance our teaching mission and generate new revenues.

The review team greatly appreciated the comprehensive nature of the program self-study document, as well as its honest and thoughtful appraisal of program challenges. The team participated in a 2-day site visit (February 6-7, 2014) to meet with various constituents of the School, including 20-25 members of the graduate faculty across all four departmental units, 10 graduate students, and senior School administrators. We had the opportunity to question the faculty, staff and students with whom we met. This report expands upon the primary messages that we relayed to these constituent groups at the conclusion of our site visit.

A common theme emerged from our discussions and is reflected in our recommendations: collaboration offers the potential to significantly expand output, visibility and resources. Because of its intellectual diversity and focus on applied research in community engagement, SoHE is remarkably well-positioned to be the catalyst for developing innovative, inter-disciplinary academic programs and outreach projects across the UW campus. This message is echoed throughout our review. Many of these synergies are yet to be captured, but the opportunity appears great.

While the strategic goals of the School are intended to be school-wide, it is still the case that the graduate degree programs vary significantly across departments, as do inherent strengths and weaknesses. Below we offer an assessment of strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for each of the four departmental units in the School, as well as our conclusions regarding the overall graduate student experience. We conclude the report with a set of recommendations meant to strengthen the entire graduate program. Taken together, they address the four strategic goals listed above.

## **Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS)**

### **Strengths**

HDFS is the SoHE program with the longest and strongest history of research and has enrolled the largest number of PhD students in the past. With several strong senior researchers who have impressive publication and grantsmanship records, and three pre-tenure faculty who are active scholars, HDFS is well positioned to maintain or increase its very solid reputation.

HDFS has a strong mentoring model. Students work closely with a faculty mentor, receive training in research and outreach, and get extensive experience working in labs and working across multiple projects. HDFS has a unique relationship with Extension (almost half of the HDFS faculty have Extension appointments), supporting a strong research-application link that is attractive to many graduate students. Faculty members also are actively publishing and

presenting research with their graduate students and are committed to supporting their students' professional development.

### **Weaknesses/Challenges**

According to the self-report, the 10-year completion rate for SoHE PhD students (with HDFS accounting for the largest share) is somewhat low (55%). HDFS is the only program in SoHE for which time to degree is longer for minority students. Lack of ongoing funding may account for a significant portion of the low completion rates. Although funding for graduate students has recently improved, there remains the need to increase and sustain funding for graduate students across the length of their program.

HDFS could do more to connect with the other departments in SoHE (see Recommendations). A mechanism or process is needed for HDFS faculty and graduate students to learn more about the work of faculty and students in other SoHE programs and centers, and to take advantage of more cross-SoHE research and outreach collaborations. Efforts to maintain and strengthen the partnership between HDFS and Extension will also be important as HDFS, over time, experiences retirements of faculty members with Extension appointments.

### **Opportunities**

As the SoHE unit with the largest current share of graduate students, HDFS faculty leadership in fostering collaboration with other SoHE units is critical to creating a OneSoHE culture in research and outreach. We strongly encourage consideration of the obvious potential for fruitful collaboration with the Interdisciplinary Studies program to capitalize on shared interests in applied research. Also, connections with Consumer Sciences regarding family financial decisions, financial planning and financial stress seem particularly promising. Collaboration between HDFS and Design Sciences faculty to explore the intersection of environments, families and health may be the most challenging – but potentially beneficial – discussions in terms of creating new and uniquely marketable graduate academic programs and research proposals. All of these collaborations offer significant potential for external grants as they position SoHE to be a leader in interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary research.

### **Interdisciplinary Studies (IS) (PhD name: Civil Society and Community Research)**

#### **Strengths**

IS is a very productive, coherent, energetic, and by all accounts collegial faculty that is especially strong in community and developmental psychology as it relates to youth civic engagement and public health. This program is good at integrating research, outreach and practice through bi-directional university–community partnerships.

We strongly support the departmental name change to the clearer, more descriptive Community and Civil Society Studies. Despite the newness of its graduate program, IS already is, and is likely to continue to be, proportionately on a per-faculty basis, the most actively involved SoHE

department in graduate advising and grant management. They have a collaborative approach to publishing with students and to advising and mentoring students that appears to be working well and is greatly appreciated by the graduate students in the program. One review team member observed an Action Research Core meeting of the Center for Nonprofits and was impressed with the extremely high level of collaborative research planning, problem-solving, and collegial support among (mostly) IS students and faculty.

IS already is contributing centrally to joint initiatives with HDFS on youth civic engagement, and is well positioned to contribute significantly to a number of other possible interdepartmental research and curriculum initiatives (e.g., on sustainability, global health, social entrepreneurship, micro-enterprise or other human/social capital-based community development projects).

### **Weaknesses/Challenges**

Because of its small size, rapid growth of students and grants, and the need to offer more graduate courses, IS currently is in great need of new faculty lines. It must continue to grow to reach a critical mass of FTEs (given its several split and service appointments, which are valuable, but cannot easily satisfy the growing needs for PhD student research training and supervision). Although there is some potential overlap with HDFS interests, and we encourage continued collaboration between those departments, we do not recommend IS depleting faculty resources from HDFS, for multiple reasons: HDFS needs them, and it could affect morale and cohesion. Moreover, the current IS resource gaps are largely outside HDFS content areas.

### **Opportunities**

IS would greatly benefit from one or more full-time, tenure-line appointments with expertise in advanced quantitative methods (and could also use a community ethnographer who is full-time in SoHE). In terms of discipline, the program needs community/civil society scholars with a background in sociology/demography, political science, geography, culture studies, social work, public administration or related fields (but with interdisciplinary interests and experience).

We strongly recommend adding a terminal master's degree focused on applied community and civil society studies, with both a U.S. and an international focus. Such a program would help fill the Department's needs, as well as the Center for Nonprofits' need for post-baccalaureate professionally-focused applied community research trainees. These students could assist PhD students and help supervise undergraduate research and service-learning projects. Ultimately, they would fill a market demand in the community for such professionals. Such a master's program would differ from others, such as MSW or MPH or MPA by focusing on applied research training in community and nonprofit organizational program evaluation and needs assessment. It could also draw on SoHE's strengths in human development, civil society, and family, consumer, and design studies.

## **Consumer Science (CS)**

### **Strengths**

The department offers both a masters and PhD degree in Consumer Behavior and Family Economics. The content area is critical to SoHE's mission as well as its strategic objectives. In recent years the department has established a strong record of scholarship in terms of published output and especially grants received. During the onsite visit, CS faculty said they viewed the primary strength of their unit was as a focal point for applied research that capitalized on the UW-Madison reputation for strong quantitative training for students. Faculty members were heartened by hiring approval for 2 new interdisciplinary faculty positions in partnership with the departments of Interdisciplinary Studies and HDFS.

The Center for Financial Security and the BRITE Lab offer graduate students outstanding opportunities (both facilities and funding) for applied research in consumer behavior, especially consumer financial decisions. The Center for Retailing Excellence provides a vehicle for connecting with corporate partners in the retailing sector to create field experiments and other research opportunities. Together, these three units represent an extraordinary trio of assets for both the department and for SoHE that can be effectively leveraged to build collaborative research partnerships with top scholars from academic units across campus. Although the number of CS faculty actively engaged in research is relatively small, this potential for partnering with other top scholars on campus can significantly boost the research productivity (scholarly output and external grant support) of both the CS department and SoHE.

### **Weaknesses/Challenges**

By their own admission, CS faculty members are grappling with an identity problem in their graduate program, not unlike CS departments at other land-grant schools nationwide. Graduate enrollment has fallen sharply in the past 3 years (9 students as of Fall 2013, including 7 PhD students and 2 MS students) to less than half of what it was in 2010. The decline reflects a collapse in MS degree enrollment (only 2 students in 2013, compared to 10-15 students in each of the years from 2004-2011). The current MS degree has lost its appeal for students and potential employers. PhD enrollment has held fairly steady since 2007, so is neither gaining nor declining in popularity.

Both faculty and graduate students interviewed during the site visit expressed frustration with the limited placement options for the department's PhD students. Academic Cooperative Extension positions appear to be the most likely placement outlet in the minds of both groups, and both recognize the limited growth potential in this sector. Some students expressed frustration that their degree did not prepare them adequately for other academic research positions (e.g., consumer behavior faculty in a graduate school of business), and their Human Ecology/Consumer Science degree label made placement outside the discipline problematic.

Consequently, the challenge for the CS department is to reconfigure its graduate degrees to more directly appeal to the signals it receives from the market. As noted above, the department has

significant assets that can be enormously helpful in graduate student training and research experience. And, the inherent nature of its subject matter and emphasis on quantitative research methods make its faculty and graduate students potentially valuable collaborative partners for other SoHE units. These synergies have yet to be harnessed.

## **Opportunities**

We strongly recommend that the CS department consider creation of a professional master's program with emphasis on research methods, evaluation tools, policy relevance and giving students experience with applied problems in the field. This would open a much broader set of career options to graduates than appears to be currently available. By partnering with other units in SoHE and across campus in creating an innovative and interdisciplinary degree that is directly responsive to market needs, the department seems ideally positioned to take a leadership role for land grant schools across the country.

## **Design Studies (DS)**

### **Strengths**

Design Studies within SoHE consists of Interior Design and Textile and Apparel Design. The faculty members are exceptional; many have won major awards and are well known and notable among their peers. Their creative work is important and provides a base for teaching. Creative faculty members maintain private studio space in close proximity to teaching studios. This facility is rare and extraordinarily important; it helps elevate creative practice to a level usually assigned to scientific practice.

The Design Studies department has benefited from the new SoHE facilities with the infusion of new space to accommodate a nationally recognized textile artifact collection of 13,000 artifacts with climate controlled storage facilities, collection management area, library space and 24 hour accessible work area. Volunteers in the community have provided excellent support for the facility as it has made the move from storage into the new space.

The artifacts in the collection include ones of specific interest to departments across campus. Now that the collection is housed in a more public space, the time is right to begin building opportunities for other disciplines on campus to come into the space and using it for direct teaching. Possible departments that would have an interest in the collection include: Anthropology, History, Art, International Studies, as well as Out-reach and Extension.

The Virtual Reality laboratory that has been built in the SoHE building is a significant accomplishment in itself and will be the foundation and site for interdisciplinary collaboration across SoHE units and the entire UW-Madison campus. In addition, it has great potential to bring new collaborators to campus. It is important that the expertise of faculty in related disciplines in SoHE be engaged in the conceptualization and implementation of projects, and integrated into the work of this lab, propelling it forward as a team effort.

The Design Summit, now in its third iteration, has been bringing units across campus together “to enhance interdisciplinary collaborations, strengthen our design community, and explore future business and entrepreneurial opportunities related to design across campus.”

(<http://www.sohe.wisc.edu/4458.htm>) This commitment to translational work and interpretive approaches that consider symptoms and provide articulations is a great asset of the unit. Design Studies leadership and faculty should be applauded for their intellectual leadership in an area that still remains misunderstood and underrepresented on many American university campuses.

The textile and fiber science areas are experiencing increasing demand from across campus for their expertise in materials. The program has been able to offer dedicated studio space for the MFA students in the Textiles and Apparel Area. Faculty indicated that the graduate program is tailored specifically to the needs of each student. The faculty reports they are considering a design-based PhD and with their mix of faculty. If this were developed, it would be a leader nationally.

The faculty is excited about the new hire in Sustainability, especially as the position may lead to collaborative work outside of the department and within the college.

### **Weakness/Challenges**

As a department label, “Design Studies” is somewhat problematic, especially from an international perspective that formally views design studies as a ‘deep container’ for wide ranging design and design theory areas. We note that during the on-site interviews, faculty expressed a need for a clear sense of identity and hoped that the review would provide some direction for them.

While the new physical home for the department represents a dramatic improvement, the graduate studio space should but does not feature the same flexible arrangement as seen in many physical spaces throughout SoHE. Both the quality and size of the footprint needs to be considered. Textile faculty indicated that the designated studio space for graduate students is already becoming crowded with the eight students currently using it. It does not provide adequate space for the kind of work the students are doing, especially in view of the expertise of the faculty across the department. Specifically, they lack a place to explore installation art, which requires a non-precious space to install temporary work. No strong evidence of a commitment to digital production equipment contained in a central facility was viewed during the visit. Faculty reported the presence of a new and large piece of digital equipment languishing in the garage because of no way to get it into the building. Digital imaging and production capacity (using 3D print, laser, and thermal bonding), autonomous to programs as a central resource, is becoming common in centers offering graduate design education.

Faculty members in the department are farsighted and diligent professors, but as a group they lack depth in distinct and broad subject areas. Evidence was lacking of close collaborative team work outside the subject areas. At the same time, it is clear that faculty are over-extended. Too little linkage exists between interiors and textiles, which are presented as ordinate pairs without agreement on or coordination of themes that resonate as universally important. A graduate

common core needs to be inter-relational and futuristic; further it needs to connect real work issues with cross-disciplinary breakthroughs.

For a School with a resident Design Studies unit, the SoHE website is in need of drastic redesign. The current site does not project the desired image of program quality to potential graduate students interested in design.

## **Opportunities**

To better signal the program's strategic role within the overarching mission of SoHE, faculty should consider reworking the program's title to demonstrate and promote the unit's emphasis on application of theory and findings to real world situations through collaborative, interdisciplinary work.

A growing interest in micro-enterprises and textile co-operative production provides an excellent opportunity to collaborate with Consumer Science faculty and add an overt international dimension to the curriculum.

The growing recognition in the college that sustainability issues cut across all departments could become a rallying point for collaboration across units, with each offering their particular strengths. The DS faculty can lead the way on the Design Thinking applications to sustainable design.

The Helen Allen Textile Collection provides the Nicholas building with a dynamic visual experience. A graduate academic experience to match it needs to be reinvented, following the recent retirement of key faculty members. In order for a collection of this significance to play the role for which it has the potential, the University must commit resources to hire a new textile historian, collections manager, outreach and volunteer coordinator to work in partnership with the curator who is already funded via a generous privately endowed gift.

## **Overall Graduate Student Experience**

### **Strengths**

SoHE graduate students report a positive overall experience. They report generally good working relationships with their faculty mentors, with a mean score of 4.19 out of 5 (with 4 being satisfied and 5 being very satisfied). This is probably due in part to the low mean faculty-advisee load of 2.08 advisees per faculty mentor. At roughly 65 to 70 students, the program is small enough for a feeling of connection and yet large enough for a diversity of opportunities. SoHE's four graduate programs have also done a good job at providing on-line student handbooks. Diversity of students of color is also higher at SoHE than the norm for UW-Madison.

The new Nancy Nicholas Hall provides excellent facilities, much of it set aside for graduate students. The student offices are far superior to that of most programs on campus; the new building offers 45 100-square foot graduate student offices, all with some form of natural light. There is a special graduate student lounge, with a kitchen, and huge windows. (It is even key card accessed, so faculty cannot enter it. We were told that the review team members were the first faculty to set foot in the lounge.) Other outstanding facilities in Nancy Nicholas Hall include the BRITE lab, the design studios, the textile collection, a library, and a copy and printing center. The new building also has a café and many quiet corners for studying, all with great light, which are widely used by students.

## **Weaknesses**

Students report some weaknesses and challenges in their experiences, however.

Cohort and community feeling: Graduate students report that, outside of their own specific area, they do not have strong ties with each other. All of the roughly 10 students that met with the review team reported that there was at least one other student in the room whom they had not met. “In the departments we know each other well,” explained one student. “It’s just across departments [that we don’t].” Students felt that there are missed opportunities for collaboration, camaraderie, and mutual learning.

Identity: The students reported a sense of lack of identity and disciplinary direction. “I wish my degree could be better recognized,” said one student in Consumer Science. Other students mentioned the difficulty of communicating to outsiders what human ecology is, and a sense of a lack of a common thread among the strands of SoHE’s programs. “Why do we all have the same degree, even though we’re so different?” asked one student during the review team’s meeting.

Mentoring: The students reported some unevenness in faculty members’ skills in mentoring. One suggested that faculty should get training in mentoring. Others worried that the small size of the research staff in their areas meant that they didn’t get as broad training as they liked. “There is only one faculty mentor I can talk to about my research,” stated one student.

Confusion about procedures and conflict resolution: Students also stated that they were uncertain about how to address challenges and conflicts in their work environment. Despite the availability of student handbooks and the SoHE Student Affairs and Awards Committee, the review team’s sense was that the students did not feel completely secure in navigating the organizational hierarchy in situations of conflict.

Funding challenges and time to completion: Although between two-thirds and three-quarters of SoHE grad students have regularly been able to secure funding, that still leaves a significant number uncovered. This gap no doubt explains much of the 55% ten-year degree completion rate for SoHE graduate students, and why a high proportion of the currently enrolled students (two-thirds of the men and half of the women) who responded to the self-study survey indicated that they had considered leaving SoHE at some point in their graduate careers.

Access to required courses: An additional frustration that contributes to the low completion rate is that many of the SoHE graduate programs include required courses offered by other departments. As these courses are not SoHE courses, SoHE students are often turned away in favor of the students from the home departments of these courses.

Work/Study Environment: In the course of SoHE self-study, 4 out of the 34 graduate students who completed an anonymous spring, 2013 survey reported experiencing hostile behavior from a faculty member, and 6 of 32 respondents stated that they had observed such behavior either between a faculty member and a student or between two faculty members. The SoHE self-study appropriately takes these incidents very seriously.

## Recommendations for SoHE Graduate Program

1. The review team strongly encourages greater collaboration in research across SoHE units. Currently, SoHE is multidisciplinary but, for the most part, not yet interdisciplinary. Each unit has pockets of excellence, and most are complementary to research expertise in other units. We see potential synergies from collaboration that are largely untapped at this point. Greater collaboration in research, **especially to create applied outreach projects**, would maximize external funding opportunities, at the same time increasing faculty research productivity and graduate student training and marketability. The ultimate goal of trans-disciplinary collaboration would mean the creation of new theory, methods, and/or interventions that transcend current disciplinary limitations.

Youth civic engagement is already an area that connects HDFS and IS and deserves greater development. Potential other examples include:

- HDFS and CS/financial behavior
  - Sustainability initiatives
  - Social entrepreneurship
  - Micro-enterprise
  - Global health initiatives
  - Design of spaces for preschool education, family development, and possibly civic or consumer activity
2. Collaboration across SoHE to create new degree offerings also shows considerable promise. Most units report being stretched too thinly in terms of meeting both undergraduate and graduate teaching responsibilities. Some units report declining student enrollments (and placement) in existing graduate degrees. We see opportunity in pooling faculty resources and expertise to create entirely new degree programs that draw on expertise from several SoHE units, as well as other units across campus (e.g., public policy). This lowers the teaching burden on any one unit, and has the potential for creating applied, interdisciplinary degrees that combine technical expertise and knowledge with practical experience in response to specific market needs. This approach appears particularly promising at the professional master's level. This strategy turns an apparent disadvantage of broad topical diversity within a relatively small School-wide research faculty into an advantage. Innovative combinations of topics and talents could

put SoHE in position to be first-to-market with new applied degrees that prove popular with both employers and students.

3. Find ways to build a sense of community (and cohort) in each entering graduate class across the SoHE units. Examples include:
  - a. Initiate a more substantial orientation experience, jointly across programs, perhaps including visits to current research or practicum sites.
  - b. Create a common, problem-based applied course for 1<sup>st</sup> year students across all SoHE units (or maybe for subsets of units)
4. Raise the funding available to support graduate students toward a goal of offering multi-year funding (preferably 4 years for PhD students) at .5 FTE level (20 hours per week, for 9 months). We recommend an initial goal of securing funding for multiyear packages for all PhD students, and for as many Masters students as possible based on a combination of need and merit. This strategy focuses available resources on attracting top students to the program by lowering the risk of them receiving/accepting better offers. We do not recommend a significant expansion of PhD students in the program, until a “full funding” milestone is reached for the current scale of the program.
5. Re-think the degree mix and configuration across the SoHE graduate program in terms of how well it responds to market demand for the final product (i.e., employability of graduates). In particular, opportunities appear to exist for creation of applied masters programs. Examples include:
  - a. SoHe should explore the curriculum and market demand for a professional master’s degree in Human Ecology. A by-product of the degree design process would be a clearer articulation of the human ecology concept and associated components. A close examination of those components, and the match with areas of expertise of the SoHe faculty, seems likely to lead to a degree concept that could uniquely define the School in terms of its value added to the university community.
  - b. The Consumer Science department should consider creation of a professional master’s program with emphasis on research methods, evaluation tools, policy relevance and giving students experience with applied problems in the field. This opens a broader set of career options to graduates than appears to be currently available for those CS students in the PhD program.
  - a. A growing interest in micro-enterprises and textile co-operative production provides an excellent opportunity for the Design Studies department to collaborate with Consumer Science and Interdisciplinary Studies faculty and add an overt international dimension to the curriculum.
  - b. The growing recognition in the college that sustainability issues cut across all departments could become a rallying point for collaboration across units, with each offering their particular strengths.
  - c. The IS department should consider adding a terminal master’s degree focused on applied community and civil society studies, with both a U.S. and international focus.

6. Create and maintain a dedicated plan to raise awareness (both internally among faculty and graduate students, and externally for prospective students and partners) of the international dimension to the SoHE research and outreach programs.
7. Enhance professional development support for graduate students
  - a. Develop professional development milestones and individualized plans for graduate students.
  - b. Provide mentoring training for faculty who advise grad students to improve consistency of the experience for students.
  - c. Encourage faculty co-authorship with students and address un-evenness in research productivity of graduate faculty.
  - d. Increase funding available for travel to professional conferences, data collection, etc.
  - e. Create/assign a staff person (not faculty) as graduate program liason/coordinator to be available to students as a source of advice and problem resolution.
8. Update and improve the SoHE website to enhance recruitment of graduate students, faculty candidates and external partners.